

After the Republic

'...these city-sites crashed, the work of giants corrupted...' - The Ruin, Old English poem

A purple daze of rain on the hills, coming down. It's morning but you wouldn't know it. Clouds so thick the sun won't penetrate.

A small body picks its way through the shards of a city. In the darkness, the ruins look like they've been struck down by a mighty hand. A god's playthings picked up and scattered. A gap in the landscape, a terrible tear.

She thinks of the Mother with the great gash in her stomach, the foetus coiled inside a bloody chamber, ready to spring. An absence where something should be.

Loose tiles, cracked in two, litter her path. She nudges them aside with her toe.

Around her, bodies of stone slump. They give the impression of fragility, thinness. The impact of a giant fist in linen.

The Mother has told her what it was like before. In the daytime, she will not speak of it. She claims she has too much to do, what with the stacking of hay, the brewing of beer, the cawing of babies that stick to her body like a many headed Hydra. The girl knows that really it is superstition that stops her tongue. The Mother won't speak of ghosts in daylight, in case they rise up, rotten and peeling, from the earth.

But when it is night, when the fire is warm and the Mother's cheeks are flushed with spiced wine—then she tells stories. She tells of an army who came up from the south, a serpent's body gleaming with metal, who spoke a strange and beautiful tongue. She tells of their excesses, slaves with the bodies of angels, crazed limbs dancing in candlelight.

They are gone now, but still the girl feels them everywhere. The landscape is littered with their memories—buildings left to crumble, mosaics chipped away by the rain so only strange half-faces remain. They filled the county and then withdrew, like ripping a nail from the quick, blood spilling to the surface.

In the village, there are whispers of what came before the army. The land was wild, she knows—savage, barbarian. That's what some people say. Some people think that living in wilderness would be better than skirting around these fallen cities, surviving on the remnants of the past.

She has heard that in those wild days, each thing was in harmony with another—bark and lichen, skin and bone. Gods of water and sky. A language that scathed off the tongue, that scattered like honey into the earth.

Lost land upon lost land. This country now a ravaged thing, passed between owners.

She lives in this abscess between one great empire and the next. She is afraid that no one will remember these years in which she exists—that they will elapse quietly, dredged into a long

current. She has been born out of time, a fluid body floating in the death river, a dream. How she would like to carve herself into stone like these men. Better yet, to dig herself into the earth itself, to make some river of her blood, to punch out a valley with her hands.

Her foot crunches. When she looks down, she sees the smashed pieces of a jug lying amongst the dust of the road.

She kneels down, picks the shards up off the ground. Like a child's game, fitting the pieces together to make a picture. The glimpse of a woman's eye emerges, the dark curl of her hair. She wonders who this person was—someone beloved, to have had their image cast so beautifully. Dead, now, probably. Caught in the grave grip of the earth.

A sound behind her. She almost jumps out of her skin. Her brain is fevered with stories. But it's just a starved-looking cat, huge eyes peering out of its skinny body. She shoos it away and keeps walking.

Now she is coming to the heart of the city and the ruins start to take shape. There is a foul smell in the air, like rotting eggs. She knows she is near the hot springs now. It is said there was magic in them that could cure any kind of wound. A current directly to the gods.

But water is a fragile thing. The bath houses are in pieces, the springs rampant and poisoned. She has heard that even in the heart of the republic the aqueducts have mossed over, the city's river noxious, plagued with flies.

Now she follows the stink. The ashy outline of a temple emerges. Only the bare front pillars are still standing, the perfect face of a diseased body. The remains of gates lie shattered around her, hoary ice gnawing at their hinges.

Through the wreckage, she moves. She tries to feel something of the sacredness she knows was here. The chanting of acolytes in prayer, the thick smoke of incense. In her mind, she tries to fill in the blank skies with rooves and walls.

But—nothing. Only rock. Only silence.

Something glitters in the black space in front of her. A well. She can see the glistening of pennies at the bottom. And other things. A golden torque, buried deep, out of reach.

She scrabbles in the muddy water and picks out a coin crusted in moss. Her nails scrabble at the surface, picking off the clammy muck. Words emerge that she can't read. The half face of a man crowned in laurel leaves.

The coin is useless—the mints in the great towns have been silent for years, and people have returned to how it was before, trading animals for cloth. A kind of amnesia seems to have taken root. She slips it into her pocket anyway.

The rain has begun again in earnest. The soaked stones darken with water, the raging sound of it clashing on discarded metal. She ties her scarf more tightly around her neck. Her small face is set with determination as she goes out into an unknown world.